DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 339 438 JC 910 580

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TITLE Impact of Student Educational Outcomes Assessment on Virginia Institutions of Higher Education.
PUB DATE 91
NOTE 9p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administrator Attitudes; *College Outcomes Assessment; Community Colleges; *Government School Relationship; Higher Education; *Outcomes of Education; Program Effectiveness; School Surveys; *State Standards; Teacher Attitudes; *Teacher Behavior; Two Year Colleges
IDENTIFIERS *Student Educational Outcomes Assessment VA; *Virginia

ABSTRACT

For the past 4 years, educational institutions in Virginia have been under state mandate to conduct student educational outcomes assessment (SEOA) and to provide periodic reports to the State Council of Higher Education in Virginia. In an effort to examine how SEOA has developed within Virginia's institutions of higher education, a survey was mailed to the faculty senate chairpersons, curriculum committee chairpersons, and chief assessment officer of 23 community colleges, 15 public senior institutions, and 28 private senior institutions in the state. Response rates were 62%, 26%, and 27% for the three different types of institutions respectively, yielding an overall response rate of 39%. Specifically, the survey scught information on the percent of full-time faculty directly involved in SEOA, the impact of SEOA on the institution's governance structure, and the integration of SEOA into academic practices. Study findings included the following: (1) estimates of faculty involvement were 38% in public senior instituitons, 45% in private senior institutions, and 51% in the community colleges; (2) only 15 of 74 responses indicated that SEOA had led to any type of structural change; (3) 57% of respondents at public senior institutions, 43% at private senior institutions, and 51% at community colleges believed SEOA had been integrated into normal academic processes; (4) faculty senate chairpersons were least likely to respond to the survey; (5) open-ended comments indicated that SEOA had become predominately an administrative process. Study findings suggest that SEOA in Virginia has yet to prove itself as anything other than a reporting process. References are included. (PAA)

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Impact of Student Educational Outcomes Assessment on Virginia Institutions of Higher Education

Bernard H. Levin[1] and Darrel A. Clowes[2,3]

Institutions of higher education seem vulnerable to forces exerted by the larger society. For example, during the late 1960s and early 1970s we emphasized behavioral objectives both in administration and instruction. Then we experienced frenzies of "evaluation of teaching." In recent years, "institutional effectiveness" has become a byword in higher education [e.g., Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, 1988]. No operational definition of institutional effectiveness has been universally adopted. In many institutions it has translated [often via state mandate] to Student Educational Outcomes Assessment [SEOA].

Two broad questions are worthy of examination:
1. Does institutional effectiveness affect higher education institutions differentially?
2. What is the effect of SEOA on administration, faculty, academic programs, and governance structures within institutions of higher education and what is the effect upon external agencies and institutions?

Institutional effectiveness is an ill defined concept. Welker [1990] has traced the literature on institutional effectiveness and higher education from 1970 to 1990. He found it to peak in the late 1970's for all of higher education and thereafter to gradually decline. All sectors of higher education are represented similarly in the literature until the late 1980's when community college literature appears disproportionally involved with considerations of institutional effectiveness.

Welker found that the literature on effectiveness has almost no basis in empirical research; it is predominantly a descriptive and prescriptive literature and is, in our view, more properly labelled a literature of management efficiency. Welker's work also implies that institutional effectiveness is more a concern in the community colleges than in other sectors of higher education.

Student educational outcomes assessment is a logical extension of the institutional effectiveness movement. In fact, the concepts are mingled in the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools literature. Welker [1990] also found a strong inter-relationship. We would expect SEOA to follow the pattern of the institutional effectiveness movement and impact most heavily upon the community college. The community college has the least secure place within higher education [Clowes & Levin, 1989] and is the most vulnerable to external pressures asserted through state coordinating and controlling agencies and state legislatures.

Matlick [1990] surveyed selected faculty and administrators in Maryland's public two and four year colleges to determine their attitudes toward and perceptions of SEOA's impact. She reported

systematic differences in attitude and perceived impact by institutional type. Both two and four year personnel were generally negative toward SEOA and its effects, but two year college administrators and faculty were more positive about SEOA generally and about its impact than were their four year counterparts.

Not all researchers agree. Ewell & Boyer [1988] studied the effects of state assessment mandates in five states, including Virginia, and reported that "[C]ontrary to expectation, we found no substantial correlation between type of institution and response to state assessment mandates." The present study provides additional information on this issue.

Ewell [1985] proposed that the products of SEOA must be used if the process is to make a difference. Little empirical evidence has been published on the effect of SEOA within institutions of higher education and external to higher education. Evidence of use within the institution would be improved student learning and the redirection of administrative and faculty attention toward teaching and learning. Evidence of use without the institution would be enhanced credibility among key constituencies and the general public.

Geiger [1990] has conducted case studies of community colleges in Virginia. He found evidence of procedural changes in the administrative support structure of institutions but no reported changes in student learning, curriculum, or faculty involvement in the governance structures. The effect on external constituencies is also little studied. Adelman [1989] suggests that state coordinating bodies and legislatures want assurance, or reassurance, about the quality of undergraduate education. Aper [1989] surveyed influential individuals in Virginia and concluded that the political goal of SEOA was reassurance, not demonstrated proof of excellence.

Virginia institutions have been under a state mandate for SEOA for about four years. While the Virginia mandate is not nearly as rigid as, for example, that of Florida [Losak, 1988], SEOA in Virginia is clearly of the "name your own poison" variety -- each institution has some, although only some, maneuvering room.

At its inception the Virginia model, like some others, emphasized the importance of faculty involvement in SEOA design, data collection and interpretation, program change, and institutional governance [e.g., Cress, 1988; Levin, Lazorack & Sears, 1988; Lumsden, 1988; Wyles, 1988].

While Virginia institutions have, for several years, been submitting reports on SEOA activities to the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia [SCHEV], SCHEV has emphasized data collection more than faculty involvement. As a result, it unclear

how involved Virginia faculties are. It is clear, however, that unless faculties are heavily involved, SEOA is unlikely to prove either useful or tenacious.

The purpose of the present study was to provide some preliminary indications of how SEOA has developed within Virginia's institutions of higher education.

In April of 1990 a survey was mailed to the Faculty Senate Chairman, Curriculum Committee Chairman, and Chief Assessment Officer of 23 community colleges, 15 public senior institutions, and 28 private senior institutions in Virginia [ergo, N = 66 x 3 = 198]. These three positions were selected because their holders should be the most knowledgeable about SEOA, if it were operating as the Virginia model suggests. The survey asked three questions:

1. Approximately what percentage of your full-time faculty already has been directly involved in development and implementation of student educational outcomes assessment?
2. Has the governance structure at your institution changed at all in anticipation of or as a result of student educational outcomes assessment?
3. In your opinion, has assessment become integrated into, added on to, or had no relationship to normal academic practices at your institution?

After the second and third questions, there was space for comment. Many respondents chose to comment, and what they had to say was illuminating. Several representatives of private institutions [including a Dean and a staff member acting at the behest of her President] called us to inquire what SEOA was, and then assured us that they would investigate forthwith.

The overall written response rate was 39 percent. As we expected, the response rate from community colleges was much higher than that of either group of senior institutions [62% vs. 26%, 27%]. Also the response rate of faculty senate chairs was lower than either curriculum committee chairmen or assessment officers [26% vs. 44%, 47%]. We expected, and the data seem to confirm, that faculty senate chairs were generally not knowledgeable about, or involved in, SEOA.

The joint impact of senior institution status and faculty senate chair addressee on response rate is overwhelming -- of 15 surveys mailed to faculty senate chairs at Virginia's senior public institutions, not one was returned. This contrasts with a 52% response rate from community college faculty senate chairs, and an 82% response rate from community college chief assessment officers. Clearly this comports well with the notion of a greater [primarily administrative] interest in SEOA in the community colleges.

This differential response rate is not attributable to institutional size or complexity. By far the largest institution of higher education in Virginia is a community college with five major campuses and a complex tapestry of programs, services, and governance structures [according to the 1990 Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac it had the 24th largest enrollment of all colleges in the U.S. -1988 data] -- and a relatively well developed SEOA program about which it communicates freely. In contrast, one of the smallest institutions of higher education in Virginia is also a community college.

The responses themselves are instructive. Mean estimates of faculty involvement were 38% in public senior institutions, 45% in private senior institutions and 51% in community colleges. The variability was unusually high, with standard deviations in the 30s and 40s. The data demonstrate tremendous variability within institutional and respondent categories. This is likely due to lack of familiarity with SEOA [consistent with written and oral comments], although ambiguity in the wording of the question cannot be ruled out.

Overall, only 15 of 74 respondents said there had been structural change. The written comments indicate that the most frequent change was to assign administrative staff to do SEOA. Clearly, this does not indicate that much fundamental change in governance has occurred, nor that faculty are heavily engaged.

Regarding integration with normal academic processes, a somewhat less negative picture emerges. Of the public senior, private senior, and public community colleges, respectively, 57%, 43%, and 51% believed SEOA was integrated, rather than an add-on. The rosiness fades, however, when one considers the oral and written comments. SEOA is seen by many as a mandated administrative activity rather than as a process for improving student outcomes.

The survey data show that:

1. community college representatives were more likely to respond; faculty senate chairmen were least likely to respond;
2. few respondents [20%] indicated that any structural change had occurred secondary to SEOA; even those changes were largely administrative in nature;
3. most written comments, regardless of institution type or respondent's role, were consistent with SEOA as an administrative process. Even though this issue was not directly raised by the survey questions, we are surprised that not a single respondent commented that SEOA had led to the improvement of any educational outcome or that SEOA had led to any other positive outcome other than compliance; and
4. there is little evidence of faculty leadership in SEOA.

Our tentative conclusions, based on the survey data, are three:

1. across college types and respondent types, SEOA is primarily perceived as an administrative process;
2. community colleges seem most vulnerable to SEOA, as they have been to previous external mandates; and
3. SEOA in Virginia has yet to prove itself as anything other than yet one more reporting process.

SEOA, like its parent institutional effectiveness, appears most clearly as an administrative response to an external mandate. This is consistent with Welker's conclusion that institutional effectiveness is really management efficiency under a new heading; we conclude that SEOA also functions as management efficiency.

Both Matlick's [1990] data and our own demonstrate differential responses to SEOA by institutional type. We conclude the community college is the higher education institution most vulnerable to external pressures, and see this as the basis for differential institutional responses. Ewell & Boyer [1988] relied on interviews and conducted their work two years earlier; we feel the survey methods and the time of this study and Matlick's yield better evidence on this point.

Although more research remains to be done, the available data [Geiger, 1990; Matlick, 1990; and our own data] indicate that there is little effect upon student learning, academic programs, or faculty. Matlick does indicate that administrators are more positive about SEOA than are faculty; Aper [1989] concluded that external constituencies desired reassurance rather than proof of effectiveness.

We conclude that while SEOA affects community colleges the most, and while little change is visible from a faculty viewpoint, there has been some administrative change. Reports are generated and administrative procedures are in place so that external agencies are reassured and the political agenda for SEOA is fulfilled. We do not know whether there are any educational gains from the SEOA initiative. It is possible that some institutions will use the initiative as an opportunity for self-examination and improvement; however, we do not think this is an inevitable or even likely outcome for most institutions.

We have observed that the behavioral model, teaching evaluation, and SEOA all became far more prominent [both as issues and as processes] in the community colleges than in senior institutions; there appears to be an inverse relationship between institutional status and vulnerability to external forces. In addition, the behavioral model and evaluation of instruction have, for the most part, sunk beneath the higher education horizon; it remains to be seen whether SEOA will follow them.

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Footnotes

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